

History and Culture

READ TO DISCOVER

1. What are some important events in the history of the region?
2. What are the traditions and culture of the region like?

WHY IT MATTERS

Early contacts with Europeans introduced new diseases into the Pacific Islands region. Use CNNfyi.com or other **current events** sources to learn about modern-day outbreaks of diseases.

DEFINE

trust territories
pidgin languages
matrilineal

LOCATE

Wake Island
American Samoa

History

Researchers have used archaeology and other evidence to learn that waves of people from Southeast Asia settled the region. Much later, Europeans and others arrived and brought many changes.

Migration Patterns Humans may have lived on New Guinea at least 33,000 years ago. Human migration into the Pacific may have begun even earlier than that. (See Geography for Life: Migration into the Pacific.) Over thousands of years, different peoples spread to different island groups. They sometimes mixed with earlier settlers. Over time, the peoples of Micronesia and Polynesia developed some distinct cultural features and became different in appearance. While the peoples of the two regions are different from each other, they share many cultural features. On the other hand the third region, Melanesia, is more distinct.

Polynesians created these stone figures, the tallest of which stands 37 feet (11 m) high, on Easter Island, or Rapa Nui (RAH-pah noo-ee), as it is also known. After a period of peace and prosperity that lasted from about A.D. 1000 to 1500, rapid population growth and deforestation created an environmental crisis. Hunger and fighting over scarce resources devastated the island's people.





The French—like the British in Australia—used their colony in New Caledonia as a prison. They sent more than 22,000 French prisoners there between 1864 and 1897.

Cultural patterns, languages, and physical traits there all differ from those in Micronesia and Polynesia. Many Melanesians seem to be genetically linked to the Aborigines of Australia. However, peoples and cultures within Melanesia vary a great deal. Movement and mixing of peoples may have gone on for thousands of years. The picture is not complete, and more research may provide new details.

✓ **READING CHECK:** **Human Systems** Where did the first settlers of the Pacific Islands come from?

European Arrival Europeans began to explore the Pacific Islands in the 1500s. Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese navigator working for Spain, sailed across the Pacific in 1520–21. Other explorers followed. Spanish, Dutch, English, and French sailors came to explore, trade, spread Christianity, and claim territory. Later, Germany, Japan, and the United States entered the race for colonies in the area. The United States captured Guam and the Philippines from Spain during the Spanish-American War in 1898. By the end of the 1800s, foreign powers controlled nearly the whole region.

At first, colonial control was limited. American and European whale hunters sailed into the Pacific, sometimes setting up small outposts. Before the discovery of petroleum, whale oil was very valuable for lighting and industrial uses. With little or no regulation by the colonial countries, the whalers and traders badly exploited the people of the islands. This disrupted traditional cultures in many areas. Some Pacific islanders were enslaved. Unknowingly, the Europeans also spread deadly diseases, including measles and influenza.

Over time, colonial rule became more organized. Colonial powers set up plantations and military bases. The British brought thousands of workers from India to work on sugar plantations in Fiji. Despite the colonial presence, the Pacific Islands remained uninvolved in global politics until the 1940s. World War II then brought sudden changes to the Pacific region. Many

INTERPRETING THE VISUAL RECORD

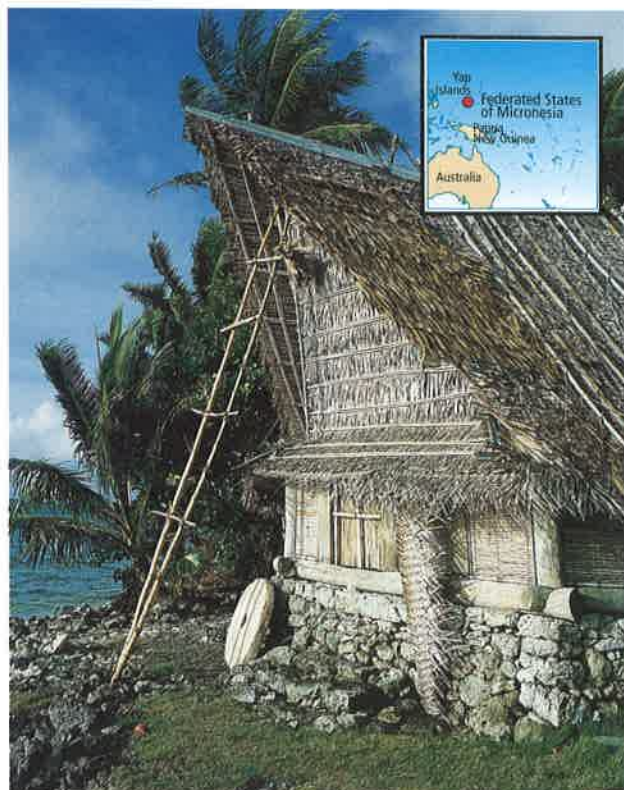
Captain James Cook, one of Europe's greatest explorers, led three voyages to the Pacific Ocean. William Hodges was the official artist on Cook's second trip. Hodges painted this view of Matavai Bay, in Tahiti, in the 1770s. How might this painting have influenced Europeans' perceptions of the Pacific Islands?



islands became battlefields between 1941 and 1945. Others were used as bases. Armies, planes, and ships moved through the region. Japan conquered many islands early in the war. Over time, the United States and its allies pushed back the Japanese and defeated them. At the end of the war, the United Nations made some islands **trust territories**. These were areas placed under the control of another country while they prepared for independence.

Independence Since the end of World War II, the islands of the Pacific have moved away from colonialism. Some have become fully independent. A few other islands are still colonies of or are otherwise associated with an outside country. Guam, Wake Island, and American Samoa are U.S. territories. The Northern Mariana Islands form a commonwealth with the United States, similar to Puerto Rico's situation. The Federated States of Micronesia are in free association with the United States. This status allows their citizens to work in this country. In return, the United States can keep military bases on the islands. Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom also have territories in the Pacific.

✓ **READING CHECK:** **Human Systems** Why did Europeans and other outsiders come to the Pacific Islands?



A piece of traditional stone money leans against the wall of this men's meeting house on the island of Yap. Although the U.S. dollar is the common currency in Yap, the stone disks are used for some major transactions, such as land purchases.

Traditions and Culture

Each of the societies of the Pacific developed its own culture. Despite the many variations, it is possible to make some generalizations about cultural features. Groups on the same island or within an island chain often shared cultural characteristics. Some similarities extended through a subregion or even through the entire region.

Today the Pacific Islands are home to a great number of different ethnic groups and languages. How did this happen? Huge stretches of ocean between islands allowed different cultures and languages to develop independently from one another. On New Guinea, thick rain forests and rugged mountains separated different groups of people in a similar way. Today the peoples of Papua New Guinea speak more than 700 different languages. Some of them are spoken by only a few hundred people.

Reflecting the lasting influence of colonialism, English and French are used in government and education in many parts of the region. To communicate within island groups where languages differ, some Pacific peoples have developed simplified languages based on English. These are called **pidgin languages**.

Education Almost all children in Polynesia and Micronesia now receive education through the high school level. Schooling is not yet available to everyone in Melanesia. There are several universities in the Pacific Islands. Most teach mainly in English, but a French-language university has locations in both New Caledonia and Tahiti.

Navigation Skills of the Pacific Islanders

To the untrained eye, the open ocean looks empty and featureless. How would you find your way from one tiny island to another? What if you were in a wooden sailboat without a compass, radio, or other modern instruments?

The sailors of the Pacific Islands used many skills to navigate the ocean. At the start of a trip, they would take their bearings from landmarks on shore to plot their direction. Then they would note the rising points of certain stars and steer by "star paths." Winds and currents were also familiar to the sailors. The flights of birds and the movements of clouds provided clues. The sailors noted the reflections of lagoons on the bottoms of clouds. They could even tell the way waves were deflected off of distant islands. Understanding all these signs helped these sailors reach their destinations, sometimes across thousands of miles of ocean. People of the Pacific Islands still use many of these skills.

Expert navigators of the Pacific Islands teach others how to use a compass based on the locations of certain stars.



Religion Early traditional religions of the Pacific had some similarities. People commonly worshipped several gods and goddesses. Each supernatural being was linked to specific areas of human life or natural phenomena. Carved statues, costumes, masks, and dance were usually part of religious rituals. The spirits of ancestors also were important to some peoples.

Christianity is the main religion in the Pacific Islands today. Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries spread their faiths through the area during the colonial period. Churches are important to community life in many parts of the region. However, people still practice local religions in parts of Melanesia, including Papua New Guinea.

✓ **READING CHECK:** *Human Systems* How did French, English, and Christianity spread to the Pacific Islands?

Food Before Europeans came, three root crops—sweet potatoes, taro, and yams—were among the key foods in the Pacific Islands. Three tree crops—bananas, breadfruit, and coconut—were also important to the diet. The coconut palm was particularly useful. Pacific Islanders ate the soft flesh of the coconut and drank the milk. They used the shells as containers and got fibers from the coconut's outer husk. The people also made roofs and baskets from coconut palm tree fronds. Rice was the only grain grown in the region. It was grown only in parts of the Mariana Islands.

Around the Pacific, fish are the main source of protein. Before European contact, the domesticated animals of the Pacific Islands were limited to chickens, dogs, and pigs. People on some islands ate fruit bats. Not all these animals were found on all islands. For example, no dogs lived in the Marquesas Islands. Easter Island had only chickens. Many islands had no domesticated animals at all. In general, people served meat—especially pigs—only at special celebrations. In Samoa, for example, an occasion's importance could be measured by the number of pigs served.

Today imported foods such as canned meat, boxed cake mixes, and soft drinks are a growing part of people's diet. The need for money to buy imported goods has pushed many farmers to switch to growing cash crops such as sugarcane for export.

Traditional Societies Historically, people in the region tended to be organized into clans or tribes. They lived in places that ranged from small villages to communities with thousands of people. Patterns of social interactions within these groups had some features in common.

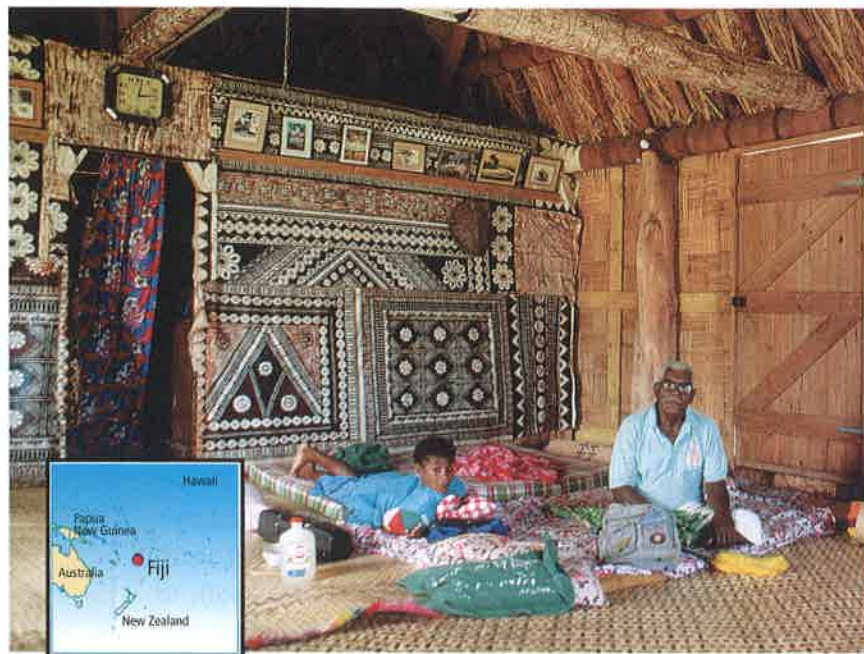
Polynesian groups often had complex rules of behavior and social ranks. On some islands, like Tahiti and Tonga, political status was kept within certain families. Individuals of high rank had great power over the common people. Chiefs distributed land and organized work such as the digging of irrigation systems. Competition for land, resources, and status often led to war.

Elsewhere in the Pacific, people placed less emphasis on inherited rank. People could gain status by giving feasts or presenting valuable gifts. They could also gain status by organizing trade with other groups or other islands. Many Melanesian peoples selected a leader through a kind of competition. A leader won supporters through his abilities or his wealth. Marriage or descent from an important family could also help determine leadership. The amount of power a leader held varied from group to group.

One interesting feature of Micronesia was that local groups were often **matrilineal**. That is, people traced kinship through the mother. When a marriage took place, the husband became part of the wife's clan, rather than the other way around. In some societies, women held high status. For example, Tongan women outranked men in several situations.

Art in the Pacific Islands was often connected to religion. Wood carvings, for example, usually showed gods and ancestors. Today island artists create similar carvings and sell them to tourists.

✓ **READING CHECK:** *Human Systems* How did a Melanesian leader win his position?



This Fijian chief's home contains traditional handicrafts. Fiji has a Great Council of Chiefs that elects the country's president.

Section 2

Review

Define

trust territories, pidgin languages, matrilineal

Working with Sketch Maps

On the map you created in Section 1, label Wake Island and American Samoa. In which of the Pacific Islands' three subregions is American Samoa located?

Reading for the Main Idea

1. **Environment and Society** What food crops did Pacific Islanders grow before contact with Europeans?
2. **Human Systems** What six foreign countries have territories in the Pacific?

Critical Thinking

3. **Analyzing Information** How did physical features affect migration and the distribution of culture groups in the region?
4. **Analyzing Information** How is the colonial history of the Pacific Islands reflected in the region's culture today? How has importing food changed the region?

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Organizing What You Know

5. Create word webs like the one shown below to describe the people, languages, religions, educational systems, food, and traditional customs of the region.

